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ABSTRACT

A two-phase attendance alert intervention system was field tested within the fifth grades of two elementary schools, the tenth grades of two high schools, and within grades nine through twelve in a continuation high school. The schools, in four different Los Angeles County unified school districts, vary by socioeconomic patterns and school system administrative organization. The first, phase, parent notification, involved the following steps: (1) a phone call on the third consecutive day of unexcused absence, (2) a letter on the fifth consecutive day, (3) a letter on the tenth day of consecutive absence requesting a conference, and (4) a home visit after twelve to fifteen days of continued absence. The second phase became operable on the students' return to school. Counselors contacted the returning pupils and appropriate adjustments were made, including such measures as class changes, program changes, school transfer, psychological testing, and medical referral. In the elementary schools the first step of the intervention system was so successful that the other three steps were obviated. In the secondary schools the four step intervention program materially reduced nonillness absence. (MLF)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EARLY INTERVENTION SYSTEM
FOR THE REDUCTION OF UNEXCUSED ABSENCES
IN ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the practicum was to determine whether a system which identifies with minimal time delay those students with excessive unexcused absence patterns and which provides interventions will reduce such absences within districts having diverse socio-economic patterns, within differing school system administrative organizations, and within differing school-age groups. The system tested in the practicum was a more sophisticated version of an earlier computerized attendance alert system which previously had been tried in a single high school. This attendance intervention version was designed to provide prompt identification of pupils exhibiting non-illness absence attendance patterns and to initiate sequenced intervention processes involving parents and school personnel.

It was installed in schools having no computer support -- two elementary schools, two senior high schools, and a continuation high school. The system was field tested during the second semester of the 1974-75 school year within the fifth grades of the elementary schools, the tenth grades of the high schools, and within grades 9 through 12 in the continuation high school.

Results of the trials indicated that in the elementary schools the first step of the intervention system was so successful that the other three steps were obviated. In the

secondary schools the four step intervention program materially reduced non-illness absence with a resultant savings in apportionment loss.

INTRODUCTION

Formation of Task Force

As a result of the success of a practicum in reducing non-illness absence conducted by one cluster member¹ in a high school in the Los Angeles area, several members of the same sub-cluster expressed interest in testing the hypothesis that such a system would produce beneficial results within districts having diverse socio-economic patterns, within differing school system organizations, and within differing school-age groups. To conduct such a study, a task force was organized which was comprised of:

1. A director of instructional services
2. A coordinator of a student executive intern program
3. A director of special services
4. A director of continuation education
5. A director of pupil personnel services

Four different school districts were represented in the task force membership. The districts had the following characteristics:

District 1 was the third largest unified district of the 41 unified districts in the Los Angeles County, had 30,000 pupils enrolled, had a 90 percent black school population.

¹John J. Grady, "Development of a Computerized Attendance Alert System," a midi practicum submitted July 20, 1974.

District 2 was an elementary district located in the prestigious Santa Barbara area, was a district of mostly white middle to upper-middle class pupils, had 6,400 pupils enrolled.

District 3, a high school district, served the lush San Joaquin Valley of California, had 2,800 pupils enrolled with 55 percent of the pupils having Spanish surnames.

District 4 was a small unified urban district, had 9,000 pupils enrolled, was rapidly changing racially from white to Black and Mexican-American.

The task force members decided there was sufficient variety within their respective districts that the requirements of the hypothesis could be fulfilled.

Statement of Hypothesis

The hypothesis arrived at by the task force was: "A system which identifies with minimal time delay those students with excessive unexcused absence patterns and which provides interventions will reduce such absences within districts having diverse socio-economic patterns, within differing school system organizations, and within differing school-age groups."

The task force then surveyed how several districts were attacking the problem and reviewed the literature on reduction of non-illness absence.

SURVEY OF PRESENT PRACTICES

Introduction .

According to Campbell, absenteeism for non-medical reasons in California schools is at a higher rate than at any other time in history, in spite of the

development of exemplary instructional programs, highly trained instructional staff, in-school student counseling programs, special education programs, continuation education programs, opportunity classes for 7th and 8th grade students, now emerging alternative school programs for divergent youth, and a society that has less per capita want than any other in our history.

Throughout the State of California, "the problem appears to be the same -- a burgeoning absenteeism rate."²

Primary causes for non-school attendance were listed by Campbell as "ineffective parenting, disintegrating family units, challenging of the schools as a viable social institution by adults and young people, earlier emancipation by society of young people and a lack of community."³ Morris supported this view when he observed that the student who tends to unexcused absences is "less inclined to accept parental order or explanation and more inclined to accept the tenets of his youth culture."⁴

Results of Conference With Consultant

As a first step in addressing this problem, the task force interviewed Mr. James Milner, Consultant in Child

Welfare and Attendance for the Los Angeles County Schools, California. He stated that he knew of no district in Los Angeles County having comprehensive plans to reduce unexcused absences. He subsequently met with the task force to give suggestions to the members that might prove helpful in making the completed practicum useful for dissemination by the Los Angeles County Schools Office.

Responses to Letters of Inquiry

Several districts replied to letters of inquiry concerning how they handled unexcused absenteeism. Detailed names and addresses are listed in the Bibliography.

1. Shasta County, Redding, California

"We have not really dealt with new intervention programs in this area."

2. Marin County, Corte Madera, California

"We have no material available."

3. Denver Public Schools, Denver, Colorado

Our school system is continuing to look for alternative programs which will have some holding aspects. For example, store front schools for junior high school students, with flexible, smaller classes, etc. Some of our social workers are also instrumental in organizing the entire faculties, utilizing positive reinforcement, in an attempt to improve attendance patterns.

4. Mendocino County Schools, Ukiah, California

The Superintendent, Mr. Delsol, referred the inquiry to Mendo-Lake Youth Project which provides truancy intervention, "as one function in our total effort to prevent juvenile delinquency in Lake and Mendocino Counties." The project, with school-referred clients, tries to "head 'em off" before students must go to the School Attendance Review Board or into the justice system.

The disciplinarians in the schools we serve say there ought to be one of us, at least in each school, i.e., a school social worker. We are, however, para-professionals. And, have, in fact, one of us to every 8 - 10 schools . . .

The project director was suggesting at the time of inquiry a High-School-Without-Walls concept which would work out a curriculum for each youth admitted, perhaps a combination of tutoring, work experience, and counseling.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The next step in addressing the problem was a review of the literature concerning efforts being made through plans which included total school personnel efforts, home visitations, and change in curriculum.

Total School Personnel Efforts

Total school personnel efforts mentioned in the literature included students taking responsibility for their own attendance; teachers and counselors employing individual and group counseling; attendance counselors working with school staff, family, and community agencies; and a team approach of pupil services workers.

Students were encouraged to help themselves in a report from Michigan.

A "no excuse necessary" policy has sharply reduced absenteeism in a Michigan high school, reported McCullogh. Students watch their own attendance, cannot exceed 12 absences without losing course credit, and do not need to bring a written excuse for absence.⁵

Before this procedure went into effect, official attendance was taken only once a day. Now each teacher fills out a form letter upon a student's third, seventh, and twelfth absences, copies of which are mailed to parents.

According to Superintendent of the Ferndale District, John J. Houghton, absenteeism has been reduced by half.

9.
Teachers report that kids express great concern now in getting to class and getting there on time. And no longer are parents reporting that they don't know their children are skipping school.⁶

The above-described plan would be illegal in the State of California.

Teachers and counselors should play a major role with students vis-a-vis absenteeism, Morris advised. Teachers should make every possible effort to build personal relationships with students, he continued, especially male teachers who can provide a necessary father figure. When teachers note vague sickness reports or feeble excuses, they should refer students who use such devices to counselors.⁷ A report by Gaetz on a study which evaluates group counseling suggested that attendance and achievement of students identified as truants and underachievers are significantly improved by both individual and group counseling.⁸

In Ontario, the truant officer has been replaced by the Attendance Counselor who works with students, parents, the educational system, and the community. Truancy is a symptom of many social and psychological problems: economic deprivation, social and family problems, emotional disturbances. The Attendance Counselor must refer those students whose problems are symptomatic of larger problems

to proper treatment and diagnostic facilities, according to Cochrane.⁹ "Problems of attendance are total school problems involving the teacher, the counselor, the administrator. Until there is recognition of this, the problem will persist and worsen," wrote Campbell.¹⁰

He observed further that the Child Welfare and Attendance Specialist should examine, "in concert with the school staff, curriculum and general school policy changes that are thought to affect student attendance"; work "with teachers to effect attitudinal change toward their responsibility relative to school attendance"; consult "with the school staff and other support personnel as to new programs that would have greater holding power for certain groups of students"; develop "with the community and parents more positive attitudes toward public education."¹¹

Gamsky reported that in a Wisconsin pupil services program, he found that a team approach was more effective in reducing absenteeism than the isolated pupil service³ worker approach. Children

improved significantly in achievement, personal adjustment, and attendance with amount of improvement contingent on length of time the child was receiving pupil services.¹²

Pupils in experimental schools demonstrated a significant reduction in absences as compared with pupils in control schools over a period of the three year duration of the program.¹³

Home Visitations and Change in Curriculum

Home visitations and change in curriculum as techniques in reducing absenteeism were reviewed.

In their book, School, Family, and Neighborhood, which discussed the effectiveness of school authority, Litwak and Meyer suggested caution in the use of home calls.

Sending a truant officer or a principal to tell parents what they must do is a more aggressive procedure than sending a note to them about a situation or asking them to come to the school to discuss it. The first procedure gives the family much less option to alter its behavior on its own decision, but it does provide the formal authority with much more opportunity to observe what is going on. It may place the family in the difficult position of feeling spied on and coerced, thereby discouraging cooperation.¹⁴

New York's School-Home Contact Program sent paraprofessionals familiar with the community into the homes of students who showed serious problems in attendance, adjustment, or achievement. The findings by Erickson and others allowed them to infer tentatively that over a four-month period of time the program positively affected absenteeism.¹⁵ A major conclusion of the study was that lower absenteeism has been associated with the School-Home Program and that parents valued the contact for themselves and their children.¹⁶

The Philadelphia Edison Project attempted to reduce dropout rate and increase average daily attendance through the establishment of an annex to Edison High School for

reduction of class size in self-contained classrooms. Home contacts, remediation in basic skills, career development, work-stipend positions, health care, and food services were offered.¹⁷ Resultant average daily attendance (ADA) in the experimental group compared favorably with the control group. Contact with the homes, Fishman and Edwards reported, in the Philadelphia study, was an important factor in raising ADA.¹⁸ Whenever the student was absent three days, a staff member would call or visit the home. This led to a feeling that the staff cared about the student and was probably a factor in increasing ADA.¹⁹

Project Reach-Out was an enriched guidance program for potential dropouts in New York City. The evaluator reported that home visitations did affect attendance.²⁰ Fredman observed that eliminating home visits had a "negative effect not only on attendance but quite possibly on achievement."²¹

Conclusion

A survey of present practices and a review of the literature revealed that in spite of the thrust to improve attendance through innovation in curriculum and school organization, non-illness absenteeism remains a growing problem. In those districts responding to letters of inquiry, none had comprehensive plans for attacking non-illness absence; further several of these districts are looking for such plans. In those districts where efforts have been made to attack the problem, total school personnel efforts, home visitation, and change in curriculum appeared to be important.

ESTABLISHMENT OF NEED

The survey of the present practices to this point had failed to reveal a program which met all the criteria of the task force hypothesis. To further the inquiry, the task force studied attendance procedures of each target school to discover the amount of apportionment lost through non-illness absence. A study of apportionment reports, summarized in Table I, was conducted for the first four school months of the 1974-75 term. In addition, a monetary value according to state reimbursement was calculated.

It appeared from a study of Table I that any system which could reduce the loss without the addition of clerical or counselor help promised a significant financial return to the district.

Although a monetary savings was important for fiscal reasons, the task force raised the question: could instructional time also be saved by having the pupil returned to the educational program promptly? In order to examine this question, the task force used the apportionment figure which is generated when one pupil is absent one day. This computation is summarized in Table II.

To simplify the figures in Table II, the task force converted the apportionment lost into instructional time lost,

TABLE I
 APPORTIONMENT LOST BY TARGET SCHOOLS DURING
 SCHOOL MONTHS ONE THROUGH FOUR

<u>School</u>	<u>Apportionment Lost</u>	<u>Value</u>
Elementary Schools A & B	1,452	\$ 7,679
High School C	8,398	51,059
High School D	11,620	70,649
High School E	32,375	21,375
High School F	3,922	23,845

TABLE II
 INSTRUCTIONAL HOURS LOST DURING SECOND
 SCHOOL MONTH

<u>School</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Hours Lost</u>
Schools A & B	5	537
School C	10	608
School D	10	5,532
School E	9 - 12	604
School F	10	2,028

using the second school month for the tenth grades in the regular high schools, for the fifth grades in the elementary schools, and for grades nine through twelve for the continuation high school. The number of class instructional hours in a regular school day at each level was used in the computation.

School programs discussed in the Review of the Literature, pages 3 through 9, reported that varying degrees of success in reducing non-illness absence could be achieved through intervention. The results obtained by the computerized attendance alert system installed in one of the target schools also indicated that pupils would respond to positive school interventions with better attendance.

The task force members then examined the attendance procedures at the target schools to determine what, if any, programs existed to reduce the amount of non-illness absence.

ISOLATION OF THE PROBLEM

Conferences were initiated first with area administrators, then with district child welfare and attendance persons, next with building principals, and finally with attendance clerks. It appeared that programs existed, but they were not consistent or in-depth. They were usually instituted by individual schools, but there were no organized district programs to increase attendance in four out of the five districts studied by the task force.

This investigation of attendance procedures revealed several weaknesses within the systems being used. Some of the more important deficiencies isolated by the task force were:

1. Absences were allowed to accumulate without home contact.
2. Identified truants received no follow up services.
3. Scant counseling attention was given to identified "poor attenders".
4. Parents were not informed of excessive absences.
5. Few curriculum or program adjustments were made to encourage better attendance.

Thus, the preliminary examination of systems reported by other districts to reduce non-illness absence, the monetary and instructional loss which such absence produced within the

target schools, and the weakness in systems currently in use convinced the task force members that an attendance system composed of intervention steps which included parent notification, counselor contact with identified pupils, and program modification where needed would produce a beneficial change in pupil attendance patterns.

PURPOSE OF THE PRACTICUM

The purpose of this practicum was to develop an attendance intervention system applicable in grades kindergarten through 12 which:

1. Identified with minimal time delay students with excessive unexcused absences.
2. Provided systematic intervention to return pupils to a learning program.
3. Reduced the apportionment and instructional time lost through excessive non-illness absences.
4. Operated without major expenditure of district funds.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SYSTEM

Initial Conceptualization

The first assignment of the task force was to become familiar with the computerized attendance alert system installed in School F as this was to be the basic operational model. This study resulted in two modifications to the basic model -- implementation by clerks rather than by computer and provision for curriculum/program modification for pupils best able to benefit from such change. One constraint was placed upon the field trials by administrators of three of the four districts: the system must be installed without adding staff at the target schools. This constraint later proved to hamper task force implementation.

After task force members designed a flow chart of the system (Appendix A, page 68), they arranged to meet with the principals of the target schools. These discussions resulted in additional modifications. Because of the constraint regarding additional staff, most principals could not allocate sufficient clerical time to monitor the system if it encompassed the entire student body in the field trials. Consequently, the task force recommended to the principals that only one grade level be included in the field trials, with the exception of the continuation school. These agreements resulted in the tenth grade being used in the regular high schools, the fifth grade being used in the elementary schools, and all grades being used in the continuation school because of

its limited school enrollment. Studies of absentee rates made in the target schools had identified the tenth grade and fifth grade as having the highest rates in the regular schools.

Final Conceptualization

The attendance intervention system was finalized in two parts: Phase One consisting of parent notification and involvement, Phase Two consisting of pupil counseling and curriculum/program modification. The first phase contained four steps or interventions.

Phase One: Parent Notification and Involvement

Step One - Phone Call: As pupils were reported absent at the attendance accounting period, records were kept by the attendance clerks of pupils who remained out of school three consecutive days without parental contact. On the third day of such absence, a phone call was made to the home by attendance personnel. A log of such calls was maintained indicating who was contacted at the home and the results of the conversation (Appendix B, page 69). Students who did not return the next day were identified for Step Two.

Step Two - Five Day Letter: This step was initiated if on the fifth day the student had not returned. The attendance clerks mailed to the parents a form letter notifying them of the consecutive absences (Appendix C, page 71). A copy of the letter was filed with the pupil's counselor.

Step Three - Parent Conference Request Letter: The third step in the intervention plan became operable if the pupil did not return by the 10th day of consecutive absence. This was a letter from the counselor to the parent requesting a conference either by phone or in person (Appendix D, page 72). If this letter failed to elicit response, the pupil's name was tagged for the final step in the sequence.

Step Four - Home Visitation: By this time 12 to 15 days of continued absence had accrued, so the child welfare and attendance visitor was alerted. A home visit was made within 24 hours. The attendance visitor had several duties to perform upon contacting the parent at home. First, he had to ascertain if the parent had received the two letters. If the parent denied receipt, the attendance visitor verified the address in case it was incorrect in school records and mentioned briefly what the contents had been. He next elicited the parent's cooperation concerning the pupil's attendance and obtained a date as to when the pupil could be expected to return to school. If the parent wanted a conference with a counselor, the visitor arranged one.

Phase Two: Pupil Counseling and Curriculum/Program

Modification

The second phase of the intervention process overlapped Steps Two through Four of Phase I. Pupils who returned as